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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SITREP 13

REF: TBILISI 1372

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: As of 1600 August 19, there is still no evidence of Russian troops withdrawing from Georgia. Russian checkpoints remain along the main East-West highway on both sides of Gori. Embassy officers who attempted to drive up the road from Tbilisi to Gori were turned back after the second checkpoint. OSCE military observers were able to access both Gori (8/19) and the city of Akhlagori (8/18). Russian troops reportedly threatened Georgian troops in the base at Sachkere, west of South Ossetia in Georgia proper. End Summary.

STILL NO EVIDENCE OF RUSSIAN WITHDRAWAL

¶2. (C) As of 1600 August 19, there is still no sign of a Russian withdrawal from Georgian territory, including South Ossetia. To the contrary, Russian troops were reportedly moving around the occupied areas of Georgia, undertaking missions of varying military significance. The GOG reports that Russian troops set mines on roads and bridges in Kaspi and Mestia, as well as other areas they occupy. The Russians reportedly left the military base at Senaki and returned later in the day on August 18. During the course of the day, the airfield was dynamited. Russian soldiers burned cottages at the "Patriot" youth camp near the Abkhaz cease-fire line. At the village of Lamiskana, near Igoeti, on the Georgian side of the South Ossetian cease-fire line, Russian tanks crushed Georgian police vehicles that had attempted to impede their progress into the town. No shots were reported to have been fired. Drunken Russian soldiers did fire into the air as they harassed workers at a pumping station on BP's Baku-Supsa pipeline, as reported by the pipeline's operator, BP. The soldiers wandered off later in the afternoon and did not return.

¶3. (C) The major east-west highway between Tbilisi and Gori remains closed to regular traffic and dotted with Russian checkpoints. Journalists and some defense attaches were refused permission to enter Gori and were requested to show Russian visas or Russian-issued press credentials. However, on August 19, an OSCE military observer was able to drive from Tbilisi through Gori to Khashuri, after being stopped the day before. He saw no sign of a withdrawal. Russian Regular Forces and unarmed Georgian police manned a checkpoint outside of Khashuri and all was quiet. In the town of Khashuri people were going about their normal lives with no evidence of panic. Russian checkpoints are flying the CIS-PKF peacekeepers' flag. The Georgians reported that the Russian military approached the commander of the Georgian base at Sachkere, west of South Ossetia in Georgia proper and asked entry. When he refused, the Russian reportedly threatened to return with reinforcements. The Georgians fear a future confrontation.

FOOD SHORTAGES IN GORI

14. According to USAID, although some food convoys are getting through, experts believe that Gori is not receiving sufficient supplies of food because of the continuing Russian checkpoints. The railroad to Tbilisi remains cut due to the damaged railroad bridge (repairs began August 17 and are continuing). Armenia and Azerbaijan, both of whom depend on the Georgian railway system for trade and commerce, are providing assistance to repair the bridge. USAID is assisting the Georgian government to organize a shipment of food to Gori. National Security Advisor Kakha Lomaia, who has been the key Georgian official in Gori, is negotiating with the Russian commander there to get the shipment through.

MORE REPORTS OF LOOTING

15. (C) Two Georgians in Zugdidi complained to UNOMIG observers that "Russians" had looted their houses, and others in their neighborhood. They said nothing was being spared by the looters. Reportedly, Russian troops have stripped Georgian installations they have occupied of anything valuable, right down to the toilet seats. Thus inspired, protesters outside the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi mockingly offered the diplomats inside toilet seats. On a more serious note, there were reports that Russian soldiers were removing everything of value from both the military and commercial sides of the port at Poti.

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PRISONER EXCHANGE COMPLETED, BUT RUSSIANS TAKE MORE

16. (C) Negotiations for a prisoner exchange between Russia and Georgia were stalled by disagreements over the number of prisoners held by the sides, but ultimately the prisoners were exchanged on August 19, with the help of the French Ambassador in Tbilisi. Both sides had sought an "all for all" exchange of prisoners held, but it is not clear whether either side still holds any prisoners or not. On August 14, there were unconfirmed reports that Russian troops had taken a new group of Georgian soldiers prisoner in Poti.

MORE THAN 100,000 IDP'S REGISTERED

17. (U) UNHRC reported that the number of internally displaced persons has reached 160,000. The Georgian Ministry of Refugee Affairs count of registered IDP's is 104,234 in about 600 shelters. Although South Ossetian de facto president Kokoity is reported to have said that no Georgian IDP's will be allowed to return to their homes in South Ossetia, he was contradicted by the Russian Foreign Ministry. However, the Ministry implied that return of the IDP's is likely to be a years-long process.

GEORGIAN CIVILIANS KIDNAPPED

18. (C) Deputy Foreign Minister Gigi Bokeria told the Ambassador that 14 Georgian civilians in South Ossetia have been kidnapped and are being held in Tskhinvali. He told Poloff that 250 Georgian civilians are being held in a camp in Tskhinvali and are being forced to work.

AZERIS CANCEL BIG CONTRACT WITH TBILAVIAMSHENI

19. (U) A Tbilisi businessman in a position to know told us that all-but-completed negotiations for a \$135 million contract between the Azerbaijan government and Tbilisi aircraft manufacturer Tbilaviamsheni to refurbish Azeri SU-25

military jets were scuttled by the Azeris in the last few days. The Tbilaviamsheni factory's aircraft runway was a target of Russian bombs last week. The large contract would have been a major boost for Tbilaviamsheni, one of the few complex technology manufacturers in Georgia.

FOREST FIRES CONTINUE TO BURN

¶10. (U) Forest fires that are believed to have been intentionally set by Russian forces continued to burn in the Borjomi National Park, despite efforts to control them. At least one new fire was detected August 19 near the village of Kvabiskhvevi.
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